DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 177 590 CS 205 230

AUTHOR Christiansen, Pauline
TITLE Across Disciplines: A Three Pronged Approach--One Department's Response to Campus-Wide Writing Needs.
PUB DATE Apr 79
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (30th, Minneapolis, MN, April 5-7, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Community Colleges; *Composition (Literary); Higher Education; *Interdisciplinary Approach; *Program Development; Program Planning; *Teacher Education; *Teacher Workshops

ABSTRACT

A west coast community college English department used the following three approaches to seek more effective cross discipline writing awareness: in-house techniques--including topics from various disciplines in classroom assignments; meeting-them-halfway techniques--providing resource people and materials for all instructors and students who wanted help in their writing; and outreach techniques--going directly to instructors in other disciplines to hear their concerns and develop joint programs for possible solutions. An English workshop for faculty, focusing on student writing problems in all disciplines, was planned as one outreach technique. Workshop preparation involved careful attention to timing, involvement, and follow-through to insure maximum attendance and to provide the faculty with a positive experience. Numerous cooperative projects developed as offshoots of the workshop, including an interdisciplinary English/history course, the development of tape recordings to help nursing students learn medical terminology by mastering Greek and Latin word roots, and English instruction in music composition classes to show students how to match lyrics with musical rhythms. (AEA)

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ACROSS DISCIPLINES: A THREE PRONGED APPROACH -- ONE DEPARTMENT's RESPONSE TO CAMPUS-WIDE WRITING NEEDS

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Pauline Christiansen
Bellevue Community College
(206) 641-2341

C 522 230

Conference on College Composition and Communication
April 5-7, 1979
Minneapolis, Minnesota

If a former English professor of mine is right that "Your whole life's an English class," then, unfortunately, it's a class most people don't realize they're attending, and most instructors would shudder at the content. We, the English Department at Bellevue Community College, contemplated at least the entire campus as a potential extended writing class. When we did so, we realized that while lack of consistency, quality, and control was also an awesome problem here, still, we could at least establish contact with peers in other disciplines and make our mutual needs more visible.

In seeking a more effective cross-discipline writing awareness, we utilized three approaches:

1. In-House Techniques--including topics from various disciplines in our classroom assignments;
2. Meeting-Them-Halfway-Techniques--providing resource people and materials for all instructors and/or students who wanted help in their writing, and
3. Outreach Techniques--going directly to instructors in other disciplines to hear their concerns and develop joint programs for possible solutions.

We surveyed English Department offerings and materials and found we had covered our first two goals and approaches well. The majority of English faculty encouraged their students to use topics from other courses in their writing for composition classes. These topics ranged from short essay exam questions on horticulture, athletic training techniques, and the impact of port facilities on the economic development of Portland City to longer papers on social patterns, physical laws, and anthropological studies of ancient peoples. Further, two department members developed a series of video tapes covering basic English skills, which included spelling, sentencing,

puntuating, and outlining. These tapes were scheduled weekly on our "Chester" dial access system and could be viewed by individual students or used in the classroom by instructors who wanted their students to learn effective writing techniques in order to complete particular writing assignments. The English Department, in conjunction with the Individual Development Center and the Division of Minority Affairs, also designed and started a Writing Lab. This Lab is now managed by a full-time English person and is open to all students and any faculty who wish help with particular writing problems and/or assignments. Finally, various members of the English faculty wrote instructions for an analytical paper, developing a logical outline, and taking essay exams which were subsequently mimeographed and made available for campus-wide use.

Although we were pleased with our efforts to date, we felt more needed to be done. As a result, we reviewed our immediate situation and identified the following goals:

1. We wanted to learn the needs and concerns of other disciplines which required student writing,
2. We wanted to increase cross-campus awareness of English offerings and resources,
3. We wanted to plan additional programs and develop materials to better serve cross-campus needs.

To accomplish these goals, we planned an English Workshop for faculty, focusing on student writing problems in all disciplines. Despite our enthusiasm for the workshop and our belief that it would open up new areas of interdisciplinary exchange, we knew that if such a workshop were to

succeed, we had to convince the faculty to attend. From our own experiences, we knew that instructors often found workshops unproductive. We wanted to insure attendance and provide a positive experience, and that, we decided, depended on timing, involvement, and follow-through.

Timing and Publicity:

Our first goal was to schedule and publicize the workshop to guarantee maximum participation. We decided to use our State's funding formula to our advantage. The Washington State Community College System is involved in what some instructors facetiously call "the great P.I.U. race." P.I.U. means "Professional Improvement Units." Instructors in Washington must accumulate a required number of these units to be eligible for advancement on the salary scale, and our school, in turn, is partially funded on the number of P.I.U.'s its instructors accumulate. Our first step, then, was to use this system to our advantage and to inform our colleagues that the English Workshop was worth P.I.U. credits.

Secondly, our working contract requires instructors to be on campus a week before classes begin in the fall and to attend a series of professional meetings and workshops during that time. We made sure that our workshop occurred during this mandatory week, and we even went so far as to schedule it early in the week while interest and energy ran high. We also let it be known that we would serve quantities of free refreshments and goodies. With the workshop scheduled during optimum time, we then papered the campus with brochures describing the workshop and listing the contents of "useful" information packets that would be

available to participants. We also wrote personal notes to teachers we knew in other disciplines, and whenever we saw them during opening-day activities, we encouraged them to attend.

Results:

Our efforts more than paid off. Sixty-three of the one hundred full-time faculty attended--four times as many as attended other workshops offered during the week. They represented nineteen disciplines, ranging from those traditionally linked with writing, such as philosophy and history, to others more vocationally or scientifically oriented, such as biomedical photography, math, economics, and engineering.

Involvement:

We wanted to involve all participants in the presentation. We achieved this by breaking the large group of sixty-three into small working groups of seven to ten. Each small group was led by an English Department member. To open communications, first each participant was asked to fill out a questionnaire to identify specific writing problems in her/his area. Then each group prioritized the problems cited by the participants. After a set time, the large group reconvened. We collated the results of the prioritized lists, and a general discussion ensued.

Results:

The experience was entirely positive. Participants became so involved in their small group discussions, they did not want to leave them. We extended the time period for the individual groups from half an hour to a full hour to allow adequate time for everyone to share problems and possible solutions. People were delighted with the opportunity to share their ideas

and concerns and in the progress discovered many mutual considerations. An atmosphere of cooperative listening, sharing, and planning developed in all the groups. The full group discussion was likewise open, relaxed, and energized. Our workshop ended only because we ran out of time; interest and discussion continued long after we officially adjourned.

Follow-Through:

Many English faculty felt that a major weakness in many workshops was a lack of follow-through. To avoid this, we decided to keep our participants well informed of both the immediate and the long range results of the workshop. We wanted to assure the participants that their ideas and views would affect actions. Immediate feedback had occurred during the workshop itself when the individual groups shared their prioritized concerns and developed a "master list" in the full group discussion. Then the results of the individual surveys, the minutes of the various small groups, and a summary of the total group findings were distributed to each participant within a week after the workshop. Our long range feedback is still in progress. In June, a report describing new ideas and materials will be sent to the participants that hopefully will encourage a continued exchange of ideas and further new suggestions.

Results:

The Workshop clearly opened communications between English and other disciplines. Faculty members in other areas now feel freer to call on us and ask for information about our programs or to send students to us for specific information, materials, or advice.

At the same time, numerous cooperative projects have developed as an offshoot of the workshop. A dramatic reading, "Voices of Women," featuring selections from one English instructor, a poet, and various scenes from plays was produced by the Drama Department. At present, an interdisciplinary English/History course is being developed, and a member of the English Department is helping the Nursing Faculty develop tapes to help nursing students learn medical terminology by mastering Greek and Latin word roots. Another English Department member is writing a script--which will be acted and directed in the Drama Department--for a video-tape which will be used by the National Convention of Psychiatric Nurses in November. English Department faculty have also guest lectured widely across disciplines. In one instance, an English instructor met with music composition classes to show those students how to match lyrics with musical rhythms.

English resources are also receiving increased publicity and use. At the time of the workshop, fewer than half the participants had even heard of the Writing Lab, and less than a third had directed students to use it. After the workshop, student referrals to the Lab increased by over 100%. Three teachers, one in history, one in psychology, and one in physics, went so far as to help the Lab develop a folder including information relevant to their particular disciplines and writing assignments. The English video-tapes, which 48% of the participants were unaware of before the workshop, are currently being used by whole classes or are recommended to individual students in business, nursing, law enforcement, and early childhood education programs. These tapes have been so successful that English faculty now have difficulty scheduling them for their own students, and duplicate copies will probably need to be made in the near future.

Summary

We feel that our Workshop was an unqualified success. As an outreach program, it developed positive attitudes and opened communication and cooperative sharing between English and other disciplines. We now see ourselves as a faculty sharing mutual concerns and goals. The English department is no longer cloistered in the nether regions--but has extended itself, as it should, to affect writing across campus. We, in turn, are stimulated by the input we receive from our colleagues in other disciplines. Finally, our students have perhaps benefited the most--and where it counts--in improved instruction.

Note: I would be happy to consult with faculties in other schools and colleges on how to make such cross-disciplinary workshops work and/or to share specific materials used in our workshop at Bellevue Community College.

Pauline Christiansen
Bellevue Community College
Bellevue, WA 98007